FIFTY PAINTINGS BY GEORGE INNESS

TP l.c. 4/13/72

994
TP 6 C14

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
Metropolitan New York Library Council - METRO

http://archive.org/details/fiftypageor00inne

FIFTY PAINTINGS BY GEORGE INNESS

INTRODUCTION BY

ELLIOTT DAINGERFIELD

NEW YORK
PRIVATELY PRINTED
MMCXIII

1913

Copyright, 1913
by
Frederic Fairchild Sherman

INTRODUCTION

GEORGE INNESS

TO one who intends making the study of the work of a master in painting there is an intense interest in knowing the paths through which he has walked, the difficulties he has surmounted and the beginnings of his labors—the formative processes as well as the successful expression which is the result of his labor.

That no such complete analysis of the life-work of George Inness has been made is well known, although much has been said and written of him. So much, in fact, that we all have a partial knowledge, a speaking acquaintance, so to say, yet few who see or who own his pictures would venture to express complete understanding of a mind that was gentle and child-like at times, yet always complex and difficult, even erratic, and which with advancing years grew to be highly nervous—vastly emotional—intensely interested in philosophical research when considering questions relative to art or religion, the two subjects which lay at the core of his deepest sympathies and which he intermarried in a way that, for the outsider, the listener, was most distracting. Yet I do not believe that anyone, whether craftsman or connoisseur, will ever rightly comprehend the art of George Inness unless he

places himself squarely on the platform of the man's religious convictions, and seeks in his works those eliminations of the gross, or the material, in order that the spiritual may be seen, which was the aim and intent of his best and highest effort. The representation of things was needful merely that significance might be fully understood. That he was willing to give up nearly the half of a life-time to the mastery of things, of the craft which would assure him power in this elimination is characteristic of the man,—"I paint in all these details in order that I may know how to paint them out", he said.

The fabric then, the substructure, is never fully seen in the noble later works of the master, yet it would be fantastic to think it absent, or that he had achieved this nobility without the long process of trained observation, effort, and rendering, for the painter must practice his processes as constantly as must a musician labor with the scales.

Wherever and whenever the opportunity comes to study and know the great painter, it becomes our duty to seize it, for he is very rich in interest, intense in effort, and dramatic in result, and above all, what he did he did for us, his countrymen, and we should know him as we know a statesman or a poet who has ennobled his time and his people.

The grouping of the following pictures into periods of longer or shorter time, is done to aid in this knowledge, and while one may not be dogmatic in assigning a date to a particular work, since Inness was

habitually careless about dating his work and, also, because upon many canvasses the date has been supplied by other hands, and wrongly, still there is a latitude which may be accepted, and which will do slight harm to a right understanding of the beautiful pictures we have before us.

The earlier works, running from number 1 to number 6 are all unmistakably filled with that conscientious fidelity which makes him master of detail, are delightful in just that open door quality of mind which was present with him as he worked. One sees at a glance, (if indeed one has the rhythmical sense) that Inness always 'felt' composition both of line and mass; that he knew, also, projection and scale. Seldom does he offend by an over large or an over small grouping in a given space. At no time a decorator in the sense used by the mural painter, there is ever a symmetry and style of placement in these early works which proclaim him a master of composition almost by intuition.

Try, for a moment, the rendering of any one of these works into mere outline, and you gain part of the idea I mean,—add to this the color spots, and his 'largeness' even in the more elaborate canvases is felt at once. Then proceed to an observation of the works here chosen to mark what may be called the middle period, and we see, easily, his growth in expression, the enlarging of his power with no loss of accuracy, no omission of essentials, but with less of the surface of things, less that is of doubtful importance, less reflection of others, and a broader vision.

To many painters and even to some collectors, these earlier works are more delightful. The Hobbema-like delicacy of leafage, the wealth of detail, done with a touch quite as sure as the Dutch master, and the added charm which comes from great distances with the aerial perspective and the panoramic vision which he employed in some of the smaller canvases. The painting, also, was done in an understandable way—there were no habits, no processes which interfere with a directness of statement.

To some folk painting is merely the sitting down and copying of forms in their relations to one another, with small appreciation on the part of such people of the infinite difficulties of color, tone, balance, rhythm, weather, knowledge of sky, of time, of the intricate mysteries of light and atmosphere. That Inness achieved these things in much of his early work is true, and we are not in error in loving them.

The influence upon ourselves is nearly always from the objective to the subjective, and if we find a man who in painting can give us, without offense or loss of that relationship of parts which belongs to beauty, the completeness of things, we may study and love him to advantage.

It would be a very delightful thing if a writer could find words to make plain all the many touches, lines, spots and balances which a painter employs; if, in brief, he could tell people how it is done; but this may not be,—not any plainer is it than the language used by the painter himself in his work.

Consider for a moment this early work, "Berkshire Hills," No. 1. It is not truly a George Inness at all, except that he painted it. Rather it is an essay, an adventure into the realms of another's methods, another's processes by which he has achieved, and Inness frankly seeks to acquaint himself with the habit of drawing, the characteristic treatment of foliage, the near and far of the scene. It is a composition purely intellectual and like many that the early Dutchmen have left behind them.

Now examine the "Passing Shower," No. 7. You have much the same spirit of composition. The road leads down into the middle distance and is lost behind the low hills. Sheep instead of the wagon-team are used to give movement and direction, but observe, there is weather here—the wind is in the trees—the same faithfulness in rendering leafage, but the leaves are merely part of the branches, and the branches mass into the full round tree whipped by the wind. The grove about the house in the middle distance is beautifully massed and its silhouette superb; and over all a sky that is masterly and wholly Inness. We may readily, then, say the master is coming into his own.

Consider, now, another example—the picture in the Metropolitan Museum, No. 12, to discover two great beauties which the painter is mastering as he develops,—the law of balance, and the beauty of design in the sky-line. In the first case you have the entire and majestic mass on the left of the canvas balanced adequately, almost perfectly, by the single queer, prun-

ed stump of an old tree. How interestingly this old tree is drawn,—how well it holds the attention. So well, indeed, that we are not disturbed by an otherwise overbalancing mass on the left. The curving line leading into the picture helps all this, and if we will study the design of the whole earth mass as it breaks upon the luminous glory of the sky, we will discover certain very fascinating items. The rounding mass of trees is saved from too great density by the opening of the light. How artfully the figure is placed against the sky to break what otherwise would have been a too obvious angle, and the house, scarcely more than a gable showing, but just rightly placed to lure and to save the line from edginess. This very softening and tightening of the sky-line proves us in the presence of a master who understood his business.

These brief suggestions may be applied to nearly all of these earlier works, and will help in detecting that wider vision, more open handling, and increasing knowledge which gave us the great works of his middle period.

Personally, it is in this and the later period that I enjoy Inness most. We here begin to see within the work the man himself, and who, having studied art at all does not know that profoundly great painting reveals to us the character of its creator—not character in a moral sense, although that may also find its expression, but that thing which we know as temperament. We know that there was a response in the spirit of the man to the stormy moods of nature, be-

cause he has seized so readily the significant things which express its stress and put aside the lesser matters of detail. No. 8 is a fine example of this. Painted with a very direct touch, the assembled masses of cloud are portentous rather than active, and the subtle shadowed hush which precedes the first rush of wind is superbly caught—and though there is more of detail than in his later work—the forms are not petty, and the trees admirably massed. Somewhere I think I have said that the sky is the voice in Inness's art. No one of our men,—not even Turner himself, or Constable, better understood sky structure.

Observe in No. 15, a picture owned at present by Mr. W. T. Evans, who has owned many pictures by Inness and done much for the diffusion of knowledge of the master and his art, the broken, moist, flying fragments of cloud perfectly drawn and so true that a weather student may gauge each coming hour. This picture alone would proclaim its painter a master.

This weather quality in Mr. Inness's work in not alone shown in storm or sky. The "Gray, Lowery Day," No. 19, is precisely a weather picture—the lush foliage is fairly adrip with the presence of rain. No reproduction can adequately show the subtlety of this quality in a picture which is very famous in the history of our art. For very long the property and the pride of Mr. Thomas B. Clarke who was during the last years of the painter's life his very right hand in the business side of his affairs, and who brought the painter's work to the attention of many who would not

have known it, this picture reached a very high figure at the sale of the Clarke collection.

In it and in No. 20 we may study the painter's love for and command of those lush masses of green verdure which is so striking a feature of our landscape in the early summer, and we find this painter using a means of picture making scarcely known before. For him it was enough to walk amid the open, leafy wood to find all the subject matter necessary.

Quite easily, also, he seems to have been able to pass from the vivid life of the summer to the crisp cold of winter.

The "Winter Morning—Montclair," No. 21, is a noble example, and the simple directness of the elements in the composition astounding. One might be looking from a window. How superb and how significant is the drawing of the great log, the stump and the scattered limbs in the foreground, and if one choose he may let his imagination run, and find the whole of winter stored in that fallen tree. This picture has about it an authority both of execution and design which makes us feel that the painter is assured of himself—that he felt his knowledge and is ready to pass on to that realm of self expression which is the goal of all great art.

Is it not true that the greatest things we do in life spring from a profound conviction that we are right? We may say of this third period that it is the time of his greatest art, his greatest accomplishments, knowing his power he allowed full vent to his feeling.

Early morning, broad sunshine, storm, the sea, sunset, moonrise, moonlight, winter, summer, all were his themes, and with each one he seems equally familiar. He painted the tall turpentine pines of the South with as much assurance as the flats of Jersey meadows.

Nos. 41 and 46 are fine examples of these tall pine trees, and the No. 26 with its deep woodsey quality and feeling is peculiarly fine. The picture is now in the National Gallery—Evans Collection.

The "Moonrise," No. 24, is a rare Inness in that the picture is very simply composed, and the time is that exceedingly difficult moment when the moon rises just after dark giving its light from the horizon's edge. The silence of the landscape made more intense by the deserted boat, its single mast, slender against the sky, is powerfully felt, and one feels that the earth is waiting in reverence the light which is born in the East. This is one of the very notable moonrise pictures painted by Mr. Inness.

The "Moonlight," No. 28, and now in the Chicago Institute, shows him in very characteristic mood and with the loose synthetic touch in full sway.

The "Spring Blossoms," No. 30, a picture recently given to the Metropolitan Museum, is very typical of his use of simple means in the matter of form to express his thought, and the great reliance upon color. Color is the music in the art of George Inness.

The great picture, "Nine O'clock," No. 36, is a powerful poem of American village life. Nowhere has Inness so perfectly expressed time, and when this

picture was upon his easel he constantly said, "It must be the very hour". When this was achieved in the emotion of the work,—the merging and mystery of form and tone, he said, "Let us make it so"—and the clock in the church steeple forever registers the painter's wish.

Study the beautiful, graceful tree forms the artist employed,—his sense of the wisdom of thick and thin,—to use homely phrase,—the value of a plumed crest, or a massive body, to obscure or to reveal, these are all attributes in the art of our great landscape painter, of whom it may be said his song was of the field and the woods; lyric when he willed and epic with the story of passing forests,—and the winds obeyed him.

It is but characteristic that he closed his labors with the profoundest of synthetic color harmonies.

ELLIOTT DAINGERFIELD.

PLATES

S. Francis 1884

J. Jacobé

G. Inness 1887

26

GEORGIA PINES

EVANS COLLECTION, NATIONAL GALLERY, WASHINGTON

Canvas, 18 inches high, 24 inches wide, signed at the right and dated, 1890.

S. Hunn 1871

5 August 1892

G. Inness 1871

G. Inness

G. Inness 1854

E. Jones 1894

THREE HUNDRED COPIES OF THIS
BOOK ON DUTCH HANDMADE
PAPER PRIVATELY PRINTED BY
FREDERIC FAIRCHILD SHERMAN

WHITNEY MUSEUM LIBRARY
ND237.I5 A3 STACKS
Inness, George/Fifty paintings by George
3 2790 00000 4091